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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 000745

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/J

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TAGS: PREL PHUM JA BM

SUBJECT: BURMA WATCHERS STRESSING PRAGMATISM

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Classified By: CDA James P. Zumwalt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Embassy Tokyo interlocutors are looking for a pragmatic way forward on Burma, particularly as Rangoon plans for next year's national elections. MOFA First Southeast Asia Division Director Keichi Ono offered Embassy Tokyo general impressions on the political climate in Burma, Japan-Burma relations, and the state of post-Nargis recovery efforts following his trip there in mid-March. He underscored the importance of striking a balance between a hardline stance against Rangoon and engagement with the Burmese Government. Separately, Aung Din, a widely known former Burmese political prisoner, stressed during a conversation with Embassy Tokyo that concerned parties should reevaluate current policies toward Burma and consider a new approach that pragmatically balances sanctions and engagement. END SUMMARY

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MOFA Senses Change on the Horizon  
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¶12. (C) Reflecting on his recent trip to Burma, MOFA First Southeast Asia Division Director Keichi Ono told Embassy Tokyo on March 19 that he senses potential changes in the near future in how the international community manages policy toward Burma. Secretary Clinton's February trip to Japan and her statement alluding to a U.S. policy review served as catalyst, he observed. European capitals, too, seem to be revisiting their policy approach to Burma, Ono said. The Danish Development Minister, for example, took a trip to Burma recently and returned home with a positive impression. All concerned parties are eager to learn about U.S. next steps on Burma, Ono stated.

¶13. (C) The Government of Burma and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) are actually both interested in dialogue, Ono stressed. Sensing some "flexibility" among NLD members, Ono insisted that pro-democracy icon Aung Sung Suu

Kyi is open to talks with the junta. Moreover, the NLD is not conditioning a potential Burma visit by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon on the release of the roughly 2000 political prisoners, Ono asserted.

¶4. (C) Rangoon is already focusing on national elections, scheduled for some time in 2010, according to Ono. The military regime has asked local businessmen to run in the election from key districts. Ono also noted rumors that some aspirants are already campaigning. Rangoon is putting the finishing touches on election laws and will publish them soon, perhaps within a few weeks. The timing of the election is still uncertain but, similar to the referendum in 2008, voting will probably take place before the rainy season.

¶5. (C) Ono noted that the NLD is a bit "uneasy" about any U.S. policy review. The NLD still has not decided whether its members will participate in the 2010 elections. The NLD does not want to relinquish what it sees as one of its negotiating "cards." The opposition also wants to evaluate adequately the election registration laws before making a decision.

¶6. (C) Ono mentioned that Japan will have multiple opportunities to engage the Burmese regime, particularly with ASEAN- and Mekong-Japan Exchange Year-related events scheduled for the near term. He noted that Japan has pledged roughly \$46 million in post-cyclone Nargis relief in fields such as agriculture, education, health, and water sanitation.

¶7. (C) Ono also took the opportunity to describe his impressions of Nay Pyi Taw, Burma's administrative capital. He said the area comprises government and military buildings,

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for the most part. There are also four "gorgeous" hotels. No embassies have relocated to the new site, however.

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Former Political Prisoner Wants Practical Approach  
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¶8. (C) Former political prisoner and current Executive Director of the U.S. Campaign for Burma Aung Din also stressed pragmatism when he met Embassy officers following his trip to Nagoya for the "Global Civil Society and Peaceful Change in Burma/Myanmar" Conference. He stated that he has no objections to concerned parties engaging the Burmese regime. Sanctions and engagement in general "should be used in combination," Aung Din asserted.

¶9. (C) Aung Din characterized his feelings about the 2010 elections in a similar way -- "not optimistic, but pragmatic." He hinted that a number of countries from ASEAN and Europe are pressing his group to support the elections. Aung Din's group backs "engagement" with the regime as long as such activity centers on "real" issues, such as the release of political prisoners. "The time is now, before the elections, to engage the regime in the release of all political prisoners," Aung Din stressed. Elections cannot be held if all opposition leaders are in jail. Aung Din underscored the importance of Rangoon changing existing election laws to allow people with so called "criminal" records to run for office.

¶10. (C) The United States needs clear guidelines on dealing with Burma, Aung Din noted. He welcomed Secretary Clinton's trip to Asia in February and her statement on Burma, which he saw as signs of renewed U.S. interest in Southeast Asian affairs. He agreed that key players -- such as the U.S., ASEAN, and the EU -- must speak with one voice on Burma.

¶11. (C) China can play a key role in managing Burma, but Beijing is mostly concerned about security-related self interests, Aung Din noted. Beijing wants to guarantee the success of its dual pipeline project (for oil and natural

gas) from Burma to Yunnan Province, for example, and has been meeting with relevant regional ethnic groups directly, Aung Din explained. He characterized the first meeting, which took place in Yunnan in November 2008 between ethnic Kokang leaders and Chinese provincial officials, as a "failure" because the Chinese side "only made threats." Representatives from Beijing will handle future discussions, Aung Din explained.

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